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NUTRITION COMMITTEE NEWS

For exchange of information on nutrition education and school lunch activities

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GUIDELINES FOR NUTRITION EDUCATION PROGRAMS — LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

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Whenever it is possible to make a greater variety and quantity of food available to those who cannot provide adequately for themselves, steps must be taken (1) to be sure homemakers know how to select and prepare unfamiliar or previously untried foods, and (2) to help other family members accept the new foods.

Over the years, we have learned some ways to change or modify habits. We learned long ago, however, that food habits are neither formed nor modified as a result of telling people they should change.

Many U.S. families are now receiving food through two Federal programs—surplus foods donated directly to needy families and foods purchasable with Federal coupons.

In many communities interested individuals have volunteered to help with demonstrations for recipients of food through these programs. Volunteers include homemakers or retired persons who have worked as dietitians, home economists, nurses, social workers, and the like. Thus, many nutritionists will be working into already crowded schedules the necessary orientation and refresher sessions needed by such volunteer help and by workers in allied fields.

From reports of numerous State and local workers, we have organized and compiled some guidelines which may be helpful to busy workers in developing programs and planning refresher sessions.

PROGRAM PLANNING

Because of the major responsibilities of regularly employed nutritionists and workers in allied professions, the success of community programs has depended on the coordinated, cooperative efforts of all workers.

Ideally all workers should know enough about foods and their nutritive contributions to diets to recognize good things about the combinations of foods people customarily select to eat, even though they are not the usual food patterns familiar to the workers. For workers not knowledgeable enough, it is safer to teach with an acceptable food guide, such as in "Food for Fitness—a daily food guide" or the "Basic Seven."

If a great many families have food patterns that reflect other cultures, appropriate approaches can be explained in the orientation sessions.

Workers are better prepared and more eager to make an effective contribution if representatives from all concerned professional groups help to formulate goals and develop plans of work.

Realistic Obtainable Goals

Ideally the objective of these programs is to provide sound information for all who need it. Realistically all workers should realize that they are not likely to reach everyone who needs help. They should not be discouraged when a single approach does not prove to be 100 percent effective. Nor is this sufficient reason to discard an approach. It is, however, good reason for reexamination, revision, and retesting of objectives and procedures.

It seems wise to encourage all who will be involved in the program to determine how much time they can justifiably spend and what kind of contribution they are best prepared to make.

One constructive idea effectively conveyed will be more helpful than a presentation of many ideas, none of which is clearly understood.

In some areas, these programs are assigned to individual home economists in State departments of education. Such persons, make a fine contribution as a consultant to many community programs.

Working With People

These programs require all leaders to recognize that they are working first, last, and always with people. Emphasis should always be on people, not on the program.

First, it is wise to recognize that all people know something about foods—they know quite well the foods they enjoy and will eat, as well as those they will not eat. Programs must start with what people already know and with habits already formed. On occasion, workers have failed to determine accurately where they should start. Consequently, inappropriate approaches and materials have been used and effectiveness has suffered. For example, it does little good to supply nonreaders with printed materials and non-English-speaking homemakers with directions and suggestions printed in English.

The more we know about the people we wish to reach and the community in which they live, the more realistic and practical our efforts can be.

It may be necessary to work in other areas of family living before we can suggest food selection and preparation. Homemakers may need help in obtaining or improving storage and cooking facilities before being encouraged to extend the variety of foods they serve their families. This is particularly true if the foods suggested are perishable.

Where To Begin

A study of the foods people now choose in relation to those available will give an idea of how extensive a program of food habit modification will be needed.

It is also necessary to know what the general food preferences and methods of preparation are. Even if purchasing power were increased, the homemaker might not add foods that would make family diets more adequate. Instead she might add other preferred foods or increase the quantity of foods already being used.

Family size, educational level, reading, and English comprehension need to be considered when selecting and developing materials for distribution.

Recommendations should be consistent with family purchasing power, foods available, water supply and sanitation, refrigeration facilities, and available storage space. It is impractical to recommend that homemakers purchase large quantities of food—even though they may get more for the food dollar—if the family cannot refrigerate the perishables or has no place to store the staples.

Suggested methods of food preparation will depend on the kinds of cooking facilities and the number and variety of utensils available to the homemakers.

What To Teach

We want to provide homemakers with a working knowledge of food selection and preparation. This cannot be accomplished with one demonstration. Other approaches are needed—home visits, whenever possible; good use of pictures, posters, and exhibits; school activities; TV and radio programs, and good news coverage of activities.

The most effective educational programs appear to be those directed to parents and children concurrently. Thus, it is necessary to decide what to teach each group. Regardless of what activities are selected, teaching must proceed slowly—step by step.

To the homemaker.—A suitable guide to food selection will help the homemaker provide her family with an adequate diet. Food guides, such as in "Food for Fitness—a daily food guide" or the "Basic Seven," are developed for use in the U.S. and are suitable guides for most communities. These guides are flexible enough so that families using them can retain their basic food patterns. Families can round out their diets by adding foods that are acceptable to them and are a good buy nutritionally.

For example, Puerto Rican families in the U.S. can continue to eat the foods they enjoy—beans and rice, some meat and fish, root and leafy vegetables, some fruit. Usually, more milk is all they need, even if they eat less meat and fish than most American families.

There are groups within communities, however, for whom printed materials are not suitable. These people, most often in low-income groups, are slow learners or have limited language facility and may or may not read and comprehend the printed word. With these people it is better to teach in terms of adding one or two important foods to the diet. Meals are upgraded nutritionally and family members benefit.

Some principles of food purchasing, storage, and, perhaps, preparation usually help the homemaker use available foods and funds for foods to advantage. Exact recommendations will necessarily vary with the facilities found in homes and the food practices of the people.

For example, it may be good economy in some communities to choose the less tender cuts of meat which require long cooking. In communities where cooking fuel is expensive, this may be false economy.

An inexpensive food may be a good buy nutritionally, but if family members simply will not eat it, it is a poor buy. Unless experiences can be provided which help family members learn to accept and enjoy the food, homemakers should not be continually urged to use it. Usually an equally nutritious food can be substituted.

Many families prefer some foods—particularly vegetables—cooked by methods which tend to promote loss of nutrients. These are deep-seated habits and if community workers are too insistent about change, communication with the homemaker may break down and other recommendations will fall on deaf ears. It is better to recognize that change in this area may not take place readily and adjust other recommendations to compensate.

To the children.—Experiences in school designed to develop wholesome attitudes toward food or that tend to increase the variety of food that children will eat promote acceptability of new and unfamiliar foods at home.

Tasting parties in classrooms and school lunch participation help. Experiences with foods in Scouts, "Y," 4-H, church, or community groups—also reinforce the teaching parents do when they select foods for their children.

REACHING PEOPLE WHO NEED HELP

Reports from many parts of the country indicate that many avenues of communication have been used. Not all of them are available in all communities but those that are available should be used.

Direct Communication

Demonstrations and other meetings.—Nutritionists report improved acceptance of unfamiliar foods after the homemaker sees a demonstration and has an opportunity to taste the prepared food. However, many homemakers have not attended demonstrations planned for them. Some were reluctant to be identified as "needy." Others had no one to care for preschool children. Still others did not have transportation to meetings. Some, of course, do not feel the need of this instruction and would not attend under any circumstances.

In some counties where food is distributed directly to families, it is mandatory to see a demonstration before any food is issued. However, the homemaker may not go to the distribution center for the food. The husband or older children may be the ones who see the demonstration. They may or may not relay the information accurately.

Community workers have found they could reach some families, not otherwise contacted, by taking the demonstrations close to where the people live. Consequently, housing projects, churches, and schools have been the sites of many demonstrations.

Invitations to these meetings are not limited to those receiving assistance because the principles involved are useful to any homemaker. This helps to preserve the dignity of the needy by limiting their identification.

Homemakers are often urged to attend for the sociability such meetings can provide. This is a good approach because, for some, social contacts are rare.

Home visits.—Visiting nurses, social workers, or representatives from welfare agencies often visit homes of recipients as a part of their normal routine. They can not be expected to give a demonstration or teach a lesson in nutrition, but they can pass along one or two ideas, such as the advantage of adding variety to family menus. This is consistent with their time limitations and, if well planned, can be constructive.

Consultations in clinics.—Such consultations provide another opportunity to contact homemakers with ideas and information received through other channels.

It is important that homemakers receive the same idea or directions for the same procedure from many sources. This tends to give the idea or procedure both emphasis and added importance.

School activities with children.—Carefully selected activities with school children will project into homes and can be helpful to mothers who are trying to provide good nutrition for their families.

Reports indicate that cooperation with school lunch managers has been effective in helping children to accept new foods or those previously rejected. Managers have included foods in school lunch menus that were being stressed in other community programs. Often quantity recipes have been adapted to family size and are made available to interested parents.

Home economics teachers can reach some older girls in low-income families with principles of food selection, purchasing, and simple preparation. This can be an important contribution because in many families these girls are responsible for one or more meals daily.

The content of material presented in home economics classes in public schools must be usable by all students. Lessons that include foods not sold on the retail market, such as dried eggs, must be carefully planned to indicate alternatives that are available to all.

Indirect Communication

Cooperative work with retailers.—Families whose aid is in the form of welfare checks or food coupons purchase all their food in local markets and may freely select (with a few exceptions) from the wide variety of foods presented for sale. Community workers in various parts of the country report that retailers have been most cooperative in promoting good food selection.

Many independent store owners and supermarket managers have permitted informative exhibits at strategic spots in stores where all shoppers could benefit.

Developing such exhibits requires careful planning. It is better to get one important principle across than to attempt to include the whole "selection story" which too often results in confusion. Exhibits should be consistent with all we know about these particular shoppers.

An exhibit which shows some locally-preferred food combination and suggests foods that will enhance it nutritionally is good because it applies our knowledge of how habits are most easily modified.

Remember in choosing topics that people generally do not need to be educated to eat meat. When funds permit, they buy meat. Exhibits should encourage the use of other nutritious foods to round out meals.

Retailers have also been helpful in displaying foods. This may also be good merchandising, but that does not alter the fact that placing frankfurters next to sauerkraut suggests a good food combination and promotes its use. Other suggestions of this nature from nutritionists probably would be well received.

Many retailers distribute flyers each week advertising weekend specials. This could be another way of emphasizing information recipients receive from other sources. If nutritionists and retailers work together, appropriate one-sentence reminders to increase variety or to include good sources of some nutrients in short supply in local family diets could be printed on these flyers.

The mass media.—In most communities, many families can be reached through one or more of the mass media. News and food editors of local newspapers have been helpful. Announcements concerning federally-donated foods and the Food Stamp Program have appeared in the press. Food editors have described demonstrations—especially those attended by prominent persons—and have published menus and recipes.

Radio stations have included spot announcements and time has been given on ongoing programs to implement the distribution and use of the federally-donated foods as well as suggestions for selection of foods under the Food Stamp Program.

Demonstrations have been given on special public service TV programs. Some community workers have contacted persons who have regular TV shows which have a continuing audience, and pertinent information has been included. These programs reach people who do not select public service programs.

Many recipients have TV receivers or have access to a set. TV is a good medium because it reaches the audience through sight as well as hearing. It is especially important for nonreaders and slow learners who are less likely to be reached through other media.

Special Materials

Workers in community programs have felt that most homemakers could make good use of materials on selection and use of low-cost foods.

Some general materials were issued by USDA for use by nutritionists and community workers on such topics as low-cost family meals, guidelines for demonstrations, and directions for storage and use of federally-donated foods. Materials, to be effective, must be adapted to the food patterns, cooking, and storage facilities of the community.

Adaptation of materials or development of new materials requires considerable planning, reviewing, testing, revising, and retesting to insure that (1) materials are suitable for the particular group involved and (2) the content is clearly and accurately presented.

For example, if most of those needing help have only the equivalent of a fourth or fifth grade education, it is best to present the material with pictures and diagrams for the most part. Reading is difficult for this group even when it is written at fourth or fifth grade level.

Families forced by circumstances to use unfamiliar foods or different forms of familiar ones are generally most interested in learning to use these foods in dishes the various family members know and enjoy. Therefore, any recipes distributed should be consistent with this interest.

Unless the homemaker has time to read and knows how to use reference material, a pamphlet or leaflet containing all we would like her to know probably will be no advantage.

If time, funds, and staff are not adequate for the careful preparation of material, it might be wise to reexamine resources and procedures to determine whether the idea might be conveyed by other methods, such as strategically-placed posters and exhibits.

Directions for storage and use of new foods are best handled through demonstrations. For those who cannot be reached this way, preparation of special materials can be limited to graphic directions for nonreaders or simple step by step directions in English or the appropriate languages and dialects.

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